

THE HOOK-CLUBS OF SOUTH-EAST AUSTRALIA

By ALDO MASSOLA
Montrose, Victoria

Abstract

In this paper the range of distribution and the origin of a peculiar type of fighting club formerly widely used in SE. Australia, and apparently developed to nullify the guard of the parrying-shield, are discussed.

Description

Topologically, the club consists of a wooden shaft of variable length and thickness, more or less straight, and oviform to round in cross section, the head being bent at a lesser or greater angle to the shaft, much like a miner's pick, and terminating in an obtuse and slightly spatulated point. The proximal end of the shaft is variably finished, sometimes terminating in a more or less sharpened point, others having a roughening or fluting of the shaft and a terminal swelling, presumably in order to afford a better grip to the hand.

Etheridge (1893, 1897, 1898), in his studies of this weapon, concentrated on the head-end; he distinguished his varieties by the measurement of the angle formed by the head in relation to the shaft.

However, no significant information can be obtained by measuring this angle. The only constant feature of the club is the finishing-off of the proximal part of the handle, and this detail conforms to the other types of wooden clubs encountered in the same region.

The head of the hook-club is part of the root of the sapling from which the club is made, a length of the sapling being retained as the handle-shaft. It is obvious that the angle of the root would influence the angle of the club-head. Further, wood lends itself readily to the development of varieties of the one object, as the carver would obviously follow the grain or peculiarities of his medium in the fashioning of any one article. On the other hand, the shape or style of the grip is dictated either by the use to which the implement is put, or by the exigencies of tradition.

When Etheridge's varieties are systematically studied it is found that they fall readily into two groups. The first includes the heavy fighting clubs, which, allowing for the diversity of the timber from which they were made, and the angle of the root effecting the angle of the head, are of remarkable uniformity throughout the region where the parrying shield was used (Massola 1963). The second group is found outside this range. These weapons are smaller and lighter; the shaft is a flattened-oval in cross section, the head protrudes on a curve from the shaft instead of at a right angle, and both the proximal and the distal ends taper off to a fairly sharp point. They are obviously throwing clubs and, while possibly derived from the fighting clubs, cannot properly be said to be a variety of them.

Although the shape of the protruding head has sometimes been referred to as resembling the beak of the emu, to the aborigines it resembled a tooth; most of the names by which this weapon was known to them in fact do mean 'tooth' or 'toothed'. On the other hand, there is a club in the collections of the National Museum of Victoria which was made into the semblance of the head of an emu

by having had eyes and representations of feathers engraved on the appropriate place on the projecting head; further, the figure of an emu was engraved on the shaft. This club originated from the 'Murrumbidgee River' and is a large and heavy weapon, but it was made with a steel tool, and the emu representation could have been due to European influences. The emu-head makes it resemble the bird-headed clubs of New Caledonia, but the resemblance is so superficial that no historical connection between the two can possibly exist.

How the club was used

According to Davidson (1936) the larger specimens are fighting clubs, the smaller are throwing clubs. However, this statement is too wide in its implications, and should only apply to the clubs encountered in the most northerly fringe of its distribution, i.e. NE. Queensland.

Roth (1909), dealing with the Rockhampton clubs, stated: 'The heavy ones never left the hand, being used for the offensive and defensive at close quarters. The light ones are thrown from a distance, but were often used for knocking over native-bears, kangaroo and other game'.

The real fighting club was not thrown. This fact is testified to by many of the early settlers and observers. Assistant Protector William Thomas (1898) for instance, referring to the aborigines of the Melbourn tribe states: 'Leonile, the most dreadful hand weapon, used in single combat only'. However, some diversity of opinion exists among the early writers as to whether the blow was struck with the pointed head or with the back of it. A study of the club reveals that both sides would be very useful in striking down an enemy, but its distribution suggests that the point or hook was developed to counter the guard of the parrying-shield, and this could well have been its main purpose. One can visualize the warrior suddenly leaping in the air and endeavouring to strike his adversary with the point of the club over the guard of the shield.

On the other hand, the point would be turned away from the victim in the case of the club being used for knocking over a wounded kangaroo and other game; thus the animal would be killed without actually ruining its flesh by driving the point of the club into it. Lang (1865) describes an irate native punishing a girl who had eloped by beating her with the club and then finishing her off by driving the point of it into the crown of her skull.

If we accept that the club was evolved to get over the defence of the parrying-shield, we may infer that the possible steps which led to the development of this remarkable weapon might have been: first, the stick fighting club, then the curved fighting club, culminating in the **Kul-luk** or heavy sword club. This was followed by the invention of the parrying-shield as a defence from it, and then the development of the hook-club to counter the shield.

Distribution

Nomenclature

FIGHTING CLUBS

Victoria and New South Wales as far N. as the Tweed R., and one specimen from the Rockhampton District, Queensland.
South Australia as far W. as the Lower Murray, Encounter Bay, and the Coorong.

Victoria generally: **Leonile** or **Langeel**.
Gippsland, Victoria: **Darn-de-wan**.
Bellingen, Clarence, and Tweed R., New South Wales: **Coupon**.
Encounter Bay, South Australia: **Marpangyie**.

THROWING CLUBS

Richmond and Upper Clarence R., New South Wales.	Richmond and Upper Clarence R., New South Wales: Burrong and Paroon .
Herbert R., Rockhampton, Moreton and Wide Bay Districts, Queens- land.	Herbert R. and Rockhampton Districts, Queensland: Bendi . Rockhampton District: Bi-teran (in Tarumbal). Moreton and Wide Bay Districts, Queensland: Buccan .

Conclusions

When the localities from which the hook-clubs mentioned in the literature are plotted on a map, and this map is compared with the distribution map of the parrying-shields (Massola 1963), it will appear that the former spread over a larger part of NE. Australia than the latter. However, on closer examination, it will be found that this is not really the case, as the peripheral examples of the hook-club are smaller, much lighter in weight, and differ from the heavier type in cross section, in the angle of the head, and by having pointed extremities. They have the characteristics of the typical throwing club.

The hook-clubs occurring in the region where the parrying-shield was used are large and heavy, and even if stopped by the guard of the shield, would have delivered a shattering blow on it, thus helping to confuse and demoralize the opponent.

Thus, it will be readily apparent that, although the distribution of the hook-club was somewhat larger than that of the parrying-shield, the real fighting hook-club was only used where it had to overcome the defence of the shield.

Allowance must be made for a certain amount of cultural overlapping; the persistence of the old, and the infiltration of the new is a well known phenomenon. The importing of an object, or of an idea which is out of context in its new habitat, means that it has to be modified to suit the needs of the people, or the context changed to suit the new import. Thus, in the Rockhampton district, where no parrying-shields have been reported (although the linguistic evidence points to it having been known) the hook-club did not have to be large and heavy, and therefore assumed the function of the throwing club.

Roth (1909) stated that 'in the days before the advent of the whites' the two-handed sword-club was used in the Rockhampton district, and, according to his informant, an old man, it was called **bi-teran** in the **Tarumbal** language, the name which was also applied to the hook-club.

Lumholtz (1889), writing 20 years before Roth, had stated that wooden swords were rare, but that the hook-club was even rarer.

These statements may be taken to indicate that the hook-club was a comparatively recent introduction in this locality, and that it had supplanted the sword-club.

Bearing in mind that it does not occur on any of the islands to the N. of Australia, that it was unknown in Tasmania, and that it appears to have been a comparatively recent introduction in the NE. while well established in the SE. of the continent, it may be reasonably concluded that the hook-club was evolved in the SE. of Australia, presumably in order to counter the defence of the parrying-shield.



FIG. 1

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